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This is Beijing

BY YE YING | 08 APR 2015

BEIJING – *Ancient. Modern. Timeless. When navigating this vast and ever-changing metropolis, where history and the future meet at every turn, Ye Ying finds the best route is to simply follow the art.*

ABOVE: PORTRAITS OF THE QIANLONG EMPEROR AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF CHINA. PHOTOGRAPH BY THEODORE KAYE.

How does one get around and understand Beijing, a vast city brimming with history and the vitality of contemporary life? The areas north and south of Tiananmen Square symbolise the two power centres. North of the square is Zhongnanhai, home to political leaders and where the Forbidden City is located. To the south, traditional hutongs make up the residential districts. Travelling from one point to the other gives a picture of a dynamic city that reveres its past but thrives in the present.



INTERIOR OF THE UBI GALLERY IN THE OLD QIANMEN AREA OF BEIJING, WHICH SPECIALISES IN CERAMICS AND CUSTOM JEWELLERY. PHOTOGRAPH BY THEODORE KAYE.

Museums are always the most efficient time capsules, and some of the best are in the northern part of the city. The collection of the National Museum of China, east of Tiananmen Square, is filled with superb bronze wares, jade, ceramics, Buddha statues, calligraphy and Ming- and Qing-dynasty furniture.

Often overlooked is the Art Museum of Beijing's Fine Art Academy, in Sanlitun, the core area of Beijing's urban life. Here the capital's literary temperament can be discovered in intimate galleries with the works of modern ink painting masters Qi Baishi and Li Keran. The museum has an elegant teahouse where you can experience the taste of the Chinese literati by enjoying the finest green tea while surrounded by colourful parrots.



AN EXHIBITION OF 18TH-CENTURY EUROPEAN ORNAMENTAL CLOCKS AT THE PALACE MUSEUM. PHOTOGRAPH BY THEODORE KAYE.

The Forbidden City, also known as the Palace Museum, is one of the most popular attractions in the world, with good reason. The Imperial collections are incomparable, and the sense of life during the Ming and Qing dynasties is well preserved. To avoid the flocks of tourists, choose the quieter galleries, such as Hall of Wu Ying Dian, where every year the museum features a special exhibition of traditional Chinese paintings and calligraphy selected from the collection. Exit from the Donghua Gate and you will find yourself in an especially scenic spot with a view of willow trees, people strolling and couples in love. It's like travelling back to a slower paced Beijing.

A sense of Old Beijing can also be found in the *hutongs* south of Tiananmen Square, in Dashilaner. There you can try the local flavours of traditional Beijing *Zha jiang mian* noodles and *bingtanghulu* (candied fruit on sticks) as a dessert. In the urbanised enclave of Yangmeizhu Xiejie, stop for a drink at the industrial-style Soloist Coffee and check out Book Design Shop; both stops reflect an interest in western trends. Also nearby is Ubi Gallery, which specialises in contemporary ceramic art.

The centre of contemporary art in Beijing is the well-known 798 Art Zone. Repurposed from former military factories, 798 has myriad private art museums and more than a hundred galleries. The best known internationally, the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), is also one of the most professional contemporary art spaces in Beijing. On the programme this spring is an exhibition exploring the cultural history of Chinese photobooks.

Also in 798 is a branch of the Copenhagen-based Faurischou Foundation; established in 2011 by collector-dealers Luise and Jens Faurischou, it is gaining notice for its solo exhibitions of important international artists, such as Bill Viola, Danh Vo, Shirin Neshat, Ai Weiwei and Cai Guo-Qiang. The relatively stable art ecology of 798 has experienced some changes recently. In 2014, the young Chinese collector Lin Han launched M Woods, a private space open by appointment only. The first exhibition there, *Pale Fire: Revisiting Boundaries*, featured work from Lin Han's collection as well as art belonging to other emerging Chinese collectors, emphasising the younger generation's increasing cultural engagement.



THE 798 A



WORKS AT THE ULLENS CENTER OF CONTEMPORARY ART INCLUDING A SCULPTURE BY LIU WEI AND YAN PEI-MING'S PORTRAIT OF GUY AND MY THEODORE KAYE.

What 798 is best known for is its galleries. Leng Lin, the director of Pace Beijing, shows top Chinese artists including Zhang Xiaogang, Song Dong and Wang Guangle and has also brought their work to the gallery's New York branch. Galleria Continua also enjoys an international profile. The programme at Boers-Li Gallery, run by Berlin native Waling Boers, focuses on new developments in international art, and Long March Space actively shows Chinese contemporary art in its gallery and at international art fairs. Other dynamic local galleries include the Beijing Commune, devoted to discovering young artists; Hive Center for Contemporary Art focusing on contemporary ink paintings; PIFO New Art Gallery showing abstract art; and Magician Space, featuring new media art.

Not far from 798 is the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum, a must for anyone interested in learning about the newest artists. Also nearby is the Gaochangdi arts district, which is home to many galleries and artists' studios. Here, ShanghART Gallery, founded by Swiss-born Lorenz Helbling, was the first gallery to bring Chinese art to Art Basel. The experimental art space Ink Studio focuses on Chinese contemporary ink paintings, and Chambers Fine Art, which also has a branch in New York, Three Shadows Photography Art Center and White Space are all worth a visit.

Beijing in many ways is a place for artists. In recent years, the city has been criticised for its terrible traffic jams and air pollution. But no artist wants to leave. "Beijing gives me the space I need," says Zhang Xiaogang. "The sense of diversity is very important to me. It is the most global city in China and has the most active exhibition scene."

“What you do here, people see and discuss all over China,” says Phillip Tinari, director of the Ullens Center. “People do not live here for comfort and pleasure – they come to engage, to strive, to make, to contribute.”

There is enough in this huge city for everyone to write a completely different story. Comprised of so many perspectives, the city itself is an artwork, full of contradictions one moment and consistencies the next. Beijing is a hybrid: at once a richly textured ancient work of art and a contemporary creature, full of unpredictable energy.

Ye Ying is the editor of The Art Newspaper China. She is also the author of a book on Beijing's 798 art zone.

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